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ABSTRACT

Current research focusing on long-term marriages have assessed marriages at one time period only. To sort out age and stage differences from cohort effects, a longitudinal case study analysis was undertaken with the 17 surviving couples of the Berkeley Older Generation Study, a group that has been interviewed in young adulthood (1929-30), in middle age (1945-47), in young-old age (1968-69), and in old-old age (1982-83). In order to trace the course of marital satisfaction and to identify factors affecting this course, socioeconomic status, health, availability of children, distribution of power, decision-making and conflict resolution styles, and affective components from the early years of marriage to the final years were examined. Seven marriages were classified as intrinsic, six as conflicted, three as passive-congenial, and one as hostile-accommodating. All of the marriages were evolving and developing, changing with life stage, circumstances, and time. For men, the number of things done together, the importance of sex, and thoughts of divorce were correlated with marital satisfaction. For women, factors important to marital satisfaction varied considerably from one time period to another (child-related variables, work, education, personality, life satisfaction). By old-old age marital satisfaction for men and women was highly related to the number of disagreements. (NRB)

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HALF CENTURY OF MARRIAGE: CONTINUITY OR CHANGE?

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In recent years, great interest has been shown in long-term marriages by therapists, researchers, and the public. This is due to two patterns that have been widely documented in recent decades. The tremendous growth in the over-65-year-old population means that for the first time significant numbers of people are living long enough to be married 50 years and more. At the same time, it is predicted that 47% of marriages taking place now will end in divorce by 25 years, and the trend toward dissolution continues beyond that point.

Research on so-called long-term marriage has focused on two areas: the course of marital satisfaction, and studies of couples with long-term marriages. A number of studies in the 1960s reported an inevitable linear decline in marital satisfaction (Blood & Wolfe, 1960; Luckey, 1966; Pineo, 1960). By the 1970s, a curvilinear trend in marital satisfaction was noted, often with a precipitous drop during the child-rearing stage, moving up again in the post-parental period, although never attaining the original level (Anderson, Russell & Schumm, 1983; Burr, 1970; Glenn, 1975; Rollins & Cannon, 1974; Rollins & Feldman, 1970). All of these studies were cross-sectional, and each studied

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different cohorts at different times. Ages, stages, and many other possible predictors varied from study to study.

In the last decade, attention has focused on the quality and characteristics of "long-term" marriages. Cuber and Haroff's (1966) study devised a classification for marriages that endured 10 years or longer. Current studies generally consider marriages of 20 years or longer as "long-term." Yet it is very likely that a marriage of 35 years differs considerably from the same marriage at 20 years--and the marital relationship will probably evolve further by the time the marriage is 50 or 60 years old. Factors such as retirement, relationship with adult children, mobility, health, and time availability are very different at each of these stages.

Current studies of marriages that have endured from 20 or 25 to 50 years find that marital satisfaction or quality ranges from quiet desperation through resignation to great fulfillment. Laswell (1981) estimated that 20% of older marriages are highly conflicted, 20% are "Golden Sunset," and the balance are "connubial endurance contests," with either apathy or corrosive conflict. Ann Landers (1977) drew an avalanche of replies from all over the country, in which over 50% of the respondents said they would not marry the same person again. The same question posed to a class of 86 Jewish women married 25 years or more (aged 47 to 76 years) was answered negatively by 35% of the respondents (Weishaus, 1983). Todd (personal communication, 1984), studying couples married 50 years, found that about 50% of her sample were not happy in their marriages. Other studies found a high level both of conflict and satisfaction in marriage (Argyle & Furnham, 1983) and a decrease in marital problems after the children left (Argyle & Furnham, 1983) as well as a "remarkably close" relationship after 50 years of marriage (Parron, 1982).

All these studies assessed marriages at one period of time only. Many of them are speculative and not based on systematic research. Methodological problems abound: there is no control for length of marriage in many of the studies, and all are forced to use retrospective data which has been shown (Field, 1981) to be questionable. Only a longitudinal study in which the same participants have been seen over a long period of time can sort out age and stage differences from cohort affects.

Cuber and Haroff's (1966) study of married Americans in leadership positions who were aged 35 to 55 developed a typology that includes five relationship patterns. Two of them, (1) "Vital" and (2) "Total," were labeled Intrinsic: couples are "intensely bound together psychologically in important life matters. Their sharing and their togetherness is genuine." Cuber and Haroff's Utilitarian marriages include the other three patterns: (3) Conflict-Habituated pattern where tension is ever present, although it may be controlled and is acknowledged by the couple; (4) Devitalized, in which couples started out with a "Vital" marriage, deteriorating after a number of years to a relationship with little or no intimacy and sharing, and (5) Passive-Congenial couples, who are similar to the Devitalized but their marriages were non-intimate from the beginning: they were more or less marriages of convenience.

Examining the literature on marriages which lasted over 50 years, there seems to be four primary motivations. (1) Relationship of "best friends," with intimacy, closeness and love. This is closest to Cuber and Haroff's Intrinsic classification. (2) Less involved than above, they are nevertheless comfortable and content with each other. These couples are not quite as intimate, but they are very pleased with each other and their relationship; they are Intrinsic in the sense of sharing and high affect. (3) Habit, convention, convenience, and economics are the motivating factors. (4) Religious or moral

convictions hold the marriage together. These last two motivations fit Cuber and Haroff's Utilitarian marriages.

Using the Cuber and Haroff (1966) model, this paper presents a case study analysis of each of the Berkeley couples. The model served rather well to classify the marriages, but some modification of the four motivations were found necessary in this longitudinal study which includes the progression into the final stage of life.

Method

The Sample

We are studying the surviving members of the Berkeley Older Generation Study, a group that has been seen at the Institute of Human Development, University of California, Berkeley, for more than 50 years. They are the parents of a sample of every third baby born in Berkeley in 1928-29. The children were followed up regularly and the parents periodically thereafter. Data at four points, or life stages, were analyzed for the parents, including Young Adult (1929-1930), Middle Age (1945-1947), Young-Old Age (1968-1969), and Old-Old Age (1982-1983). This paper is a case study report on the 17 surviving couples, parents of the original subjects. Data for nine couples are available at all four data points; there is information at three points for seven couples, and at two points for one couple. In seven cases only the wife was interviewed in middle age. Other information available on a less systematic basis, collected from visits to the Institute, telephone calls, and chance encounters, all of which were carefully recorded during this long period, is also included in this case study report.

The most recent interviews of all these couples were conducted in 1982-83. Husband and wife were interviewed simultaneously and separately by two different interviewers, always by one and usually by both the authors. (One couple, who live 3000 miles away, was interviewed by one author only, but at different times for husband and wife.) Ages at the final interview ranged from 73-93 for the men and 73-88 for the women. The couples have been married 55 to 69 years, with an average of 59 years. The men in the sample married when they were between 18 and 29 years of age (average: 24.5), and the women married between 17 and 27 (average: 22.5). It was the second marriage for one woman and one man. Each couple has either 2 or 3 children, many grandchildren, and most have great grandchildren.

This is a small sample of only 34 people, yet it is still representative of surviving members of its cohort. Because it is the only known group of married couples about whom there is a wealth of longitudinal information gathered over a 50-year period, it is a valuable resource.

Objectives

The purpose of the study is to trace the course of marital satisfaction and to seek out significant factors affecting this course. Thus, SES, health, availability of children, distribution of power, style in terms of decision-making and conflict resolution, and affective components from the early years of marriage to the final years were examined.

This preliminary report is based primarily on a case study evaluation of each of the marriages through time. Some of the information that was made available by the subjects throughout the years has not been coded because of its timing between studies and the

small "N", but is included in this report. Statistical analyses will be presented in forthcoming reports.

Results

Intrinsic Marriages

Out of the 17 marriages studied here, we found seven that could be called Intrinsic. Three of these couples maintained a close, vital relationship throughout their marriage, or they became closer with increasing years. Two couples declined from what they characterized as an "intense" early relationship to a less intense but pleasurable friendship and companionship; one of them called it "settling into maturity." Two of these intrinsic couples showed the familiar curvilinear trend, where they declined noticeably in satisfaction and evidenced increased conflict and tension during the child-rearing years, but they moved up again to close, intertwined bonds in their 60s which persisted in their 80s.

All seven couples had their ups and downs, and all suffered financially and emotionally during the depression years, when most of them struggled to make ends meet. By the time they were seen in their 80s, they were with one exception quite comfortable financially.

Interestingly, decision-making and conflict resolution strategies for these intrinsic couples ranged from shared decision-making and discussion, to taking turns, to agreeing to disagree, to "I cry and he gives in...and that's the way it's always been."

Replies as to why they stayed married included one husband's statement, "We enjoy our own company more than any other," and the wife said, "It's been wonderful..." A couple who were 88 and 93 at the last interview demonstrated extreme devotion despite the wife's failing memory. The husband said, "I wouldn't trade her for the world. She's wonderful. . ." His wife declared she is "still in love with him and he's in love with me."

One couple whose early ratings were extremely high, have as he stated, "settled into a mature relationship, we take good care of each other, we both give to each other and we have a commitment to stay married." The wife has become more assertive but has not "grown away from him." He commented, "We have violent differences, but with thy faults, I love thee still!" Both independently commented that they are considerate of the other's point of view, and have worked at the relationship.

Sex and sexual activity varied widely for these couples. As Gordon (1983) says, sex is not the whole marriage. For some of the intrinsic couples, sex was very important throughout the marriage; for some it started with some difficulty, became very pleasurable and then tapered off; while others who found it less than satisfactory early in the marriage developed together and declared it to be still important to them. Sex seems to be one factor, and not the sole determining one in the marriage.

In summary, the members of these intrinsic couples had congruent perceptions of each other and of the marriage. Both members were non-critical, they were complimentary to each other and of the relationship, and they expressed high affect for each other.

Devitalized Marriages

Cuber and Haroff's (1966) devitalized couples are characterized as people who were deeply in love in the early years, when they spent a good deal of time with each other out of choice. However, during the devitalized years there is little intimacy and sharing and often the time together is "duty" time. This was a common pattern in the middle years for Cuber and Haroff's cross-sectional sample.

None of the couples in the Berkeley group fit the devitalized category after 50 years or more of marriage, although some had demonstrated it in the middle years. Nor had any of the intrinsic group, even those who had declined in intimacy and intensity over 50 years, settled into spending "duty time" together with little intimacy or sharing. Perhaps, after so many years, they transcended this mode in order to give meaning to their years together.

Conflict-Habituated Marriages Which Developed into Highly Satisfying Marriages

Cuber and Haroff (1966) define conflict-habituated couples as tense and conflicted, but controlled, with the energy expended to keep the marriage contained and concealed seen as a "dominant life force."

None of the couples in this sample were conflict-habituated in their later years, although there were clear indications of overt or covert conflict for at least six couples during the first 20 or 25 years of the marriages. Early and middle-age interviews describe "tension for both," "covert criticism," "hard feelings over her having to work." Other comments were "strain adjusting to his temperament," "children came first to her but his

comfort most important to him." One man admitted that he was "meaner," and his wife had to adapt to his "duty-mindedness," his lack of expressiveness and joy. Another husband confessed that he didn't know how his wife could have lived with him and his "rotten disposition" when they were younger.

By the time they were in their 60s, those couples whose early marriages were conflicted expressed mutual satisfaction with their marriages. They used words such as "mutual acceptance"; "marriage is happiest it's been now (ages 78 and 82)"; "we're both long-suffering. . .he is married to his business and I've learned to have fun alone as well as with him."

The statements made by these couples as to why they remained married are as positive as those of the vital couples. They used phrases such as "Our love has grown"; "we please each other"; "I've never regretted the marriage"; "we overlook each other's faults." Perceptions of their relationships and modes of interaction were generally congruent for these couples.

Passive-Congenial Marriages

These people, say Cuber and Haroff (1966), do not wish "to invest their total emotional involvement and creative effort in the male-female relationship." They are generally comfortable, with little conflict (it takes passion to generate conflict), and they get along fairly well together. In a sense, they are marriages of convenience.

Three couples in this group demonstrated this pattern, and it was a stable pattern throughout their marriages. They were the right age, they had similar backgrounds, their

parents knew each other, so they decided they might as well get married. They never became intensely involved with each other.

In reply to the question as to what they attribute their long marriage, one woman replied, "We're steady people who go along in the same rut and depend on each other. . . we're the same type, I guess." Another couple agreed they never thought about it, and the third woman attributed their successful marriage to common interests, give and take, and "we don't have to have all the same interests." All felt they were as close as they had ever been.

The level affect of these couples is demonstrated with one pair where the early reports noted they had "different personalities but adjusted satisfactorily," and the middle-age interview states, "fond of each other, but little deep emotion." The young-old interview likewise showed little affect, although the husband said his wife is the closest person to him. In young-old age, she commented they don't share intimacies, they "don't hold a grudge," and as they get older they tend to do more together.

Two of the men in these three couples became seriously ill or incapacitated in the last 10 years. Their wives were handling their situations with equanimity and patience. One of them had always had separate interests which she pursued and was able to care for her husband cheerfully while continuing to find her satisfactions elsewhere. The other wife also was handling her husband's illness well, giving him excellent care with the same low affect that characterized their marriage.

Hostile-Accommodating Marriage

One marriage in this sample cannot be fitted neatly into any of the Cuber and Haroff (1966) categories at any stage. This couple was brought together through intense religious commitment, with love on one side only. They have stayed together for 60 years, of which none can be characterized as happy except the first six months. It was a marriage of convenience for the man at its inception, and a marriage of accommodation throughout for the woman, so we have labeled it hostile-accommodating. The only time the husband displayed any positive affect toward his wife was when he became ill and "clung to her." When he recovered, he reverted to his distancing pattern. She referred to him admiringly, "but tinged with resentment," as there was little communication, and she knew nothing of his activities (middle-age interview).

During the final interview, when asked to describe his relationship with his wife before her recently developed illness, the husband said, "Well, you know. . .sometimes they say that marriages are made in heaven, this sort of thing, but I don't agree to that. I think I could marry most. . .lots of 'em, any number of women and feel happy. . . .So, I wouldn't say that my relationship with her has been a perfect sort of thing. 'Cause I could have been comfortable with marrying someone else. . . .She was the loving type, and more dependent. But on the other hand, when I made the vow to stay with her, I stick to it."

Some Specific Variables Related to Marital Satisfaction

Examining the relationship between marital adjustment and age at marriage, a significant correlation was observed at the young-old stage, for men only. By the old-old stage, the relationship had disappeared.

As could be predicted, by old-old age marital satisfaction for both men and women was highly related to the number of disagreements. There was a negative correlation with church attendance for both. For men, the number of things the couple did together, the importance of sex, and whether they ever thought of divorce were all correlated with their marital satisfaction. Perhaps women were less likely to admit having thought of divorce.

A comparison of the variables that were important to the marital satisfaction of women revealed that they varied considerably from one time period to another. In middle age, child-related variables, work involvement, and educational level were related, while by young-old age these were no longer important. In the young-old stage, personality variables, life satisfaction, anomie, and recollections of a happy childhood showed significant relationships with marital satisfaction. By old-old age, the significance had disappeared, and a few variables that more directly measured the couple's relationship became significant, including whether they had grown apart, and the number of disagreements. Negative correlations appeared between marital variables and self-perceptions of health. Desire for friends was negatively related with the marital scores at old-old age for both men and women.

The effect of children on the course of the marital relationship generally confirms findings in other studies. Many of the respondents reported that the best years were after the children left home, and almost all expressed increased satisfaction and closeness then.

Health is not a significant factor for this sample in their marital quality. This was an unexpected finding, but throughout this group, poor health in the later years increased their bond. Illness was not only <u>not</u> detrimental to the relationship, but was constructive.

Both men and women were able to be nurturing to their ill spouses, and spouses were openly appreciative. In some cases, the care-taking spouse felt important and strongly needed for the first time. Illnesses included stroke, heart disease, cancer, mild memory impairment, and Alzheimer's disease. Perhaps by the time people are in their 80's and married for over 50 years, the dread of dissolving the relationship is worse than the limitation imposed by the illness.

Discussion

The marriages described in this study were evolving and developing, changing with life stage, circumstances and time itself. The passive-congenial marriages changed least of all the types, as did the one hostile-accommodating marriage. While the intrinsic marriages fluctuated throughout their duration, the vital quality never disappeared for good. The conflicted marriages improved markedly through the years, and all reported "good" and "very good" marital quality in the final interview.

Despite the above summary, each marriage really is unique. Although some elements and a general style can be categorized loosely, each one is idiosyncratic and interesting in and of itself. Swenson, Eskew and Kohlepp (1981) found that as the duration of the marriage increases after the children leave, the experience of love decreases, but marital problems decrease at the same time. In the Berkeley group, for many individuals the experience of love increased when the children left and remained viable into the later years. Marital problems decreased, largely because the pressures of raising children and making ends meet decreased as the children left and couples prospered.

The women generally have been a little more realistic in evaluating the problems that arose in the marriage, while the men tend toward some denial. For example, one man said in the young-old interview, "We're very close, doubt there's any better or happier marriage, we do everything together." His wife said, "Married life is something you work out, you don't just quit. When things aren't going the way you want, you have to weigh both sides and work out your own ideas. . . .He takes the initiative and I go along and have a wonderful time." When this couple was interviewed again at ages 88 and 89, he said, "Married life has been perfect, gets better with maturity. We're closer now, don't have arguments. . ." His wife concurred that they do go along with each other, that "he's more willing to go along with me than before, and we're not so emotional, but we still feel the same way as earlier."

How can we evaluate these marriages? Almost all of these old people said it was as good or better now, after 50 years and more of marriage, than earlier. Their self-ratings of their marriage were either "good" or "fulfilled most of my expectations and was exceptionally happy." The interviewers, who rated the marriages independently, sometimes scored them one category lower than the respondents, but only the hostile-accommodating marriage was given a rating lower than the midpoint.

In rating the quality of a marriage, one question, raised by Skolnick (1982), is the importance of satisfaction versus intimacy: Does a marriage have to be intimate to be satisfactory? This is undoubtedly a personal and individual matter. Rowe and Meredith (1981) reported that spouses tended to select each other as close intimates less frequently as length of marriage increased, but marital happiness appeared to be sustained for 50 or more years.

The level of expectations certainly affects the evaluation of marital satisfaction. The passive-congenial couples in this sample were happy; they were satisfied with their marriages because their level of expectations were met. Expectations do change during a marriage. If the level of expectation is lowered as the marriage progresses, then satisfaction may increase. Adaptation, acceptance, and tolerance can contribute to a more realistic level of expectation and increased satisfaction and even intimacy.

Characteristics observed in almost all these marriages beyond the 50-year point were common interests, respect and acceptance. In addition, couples in "Intrinsic" and "Vital" marriages and those in early-conflicted marriages which developed into satisfying relationships expressed understanding, tolerance, affection and love, and were non-critical of their mates and marriages.

Sol Gordon (1983) says there are two kinds of love, the good kind and the bad kind, and the good kind is energizing. Maybe in old age we need an in-between kind, one that is neither energizing nor tiring; it may be just stabilizing and satisfying.

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